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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001144

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SUBJECT: SEVERAL SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS PREVENTED  
FROM LEAVING

REF: DAMASCUS 0578

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (SBU) Summary. The Syrian government has prevented several human rights figures from traveling abroad in recent days. The regime's actions appear to be an enforcement of existing travel bans to which there had previously been some loopholes. Many of the activists prevented from leaving were headed to international conferences for training and underscores the difficulty associated with external training for Syria-based civil society activists. In addition, the most recent travel bans illustrate the SARG's across-the-board focus on increasing security measures whether against islamists, Iraqis, Kurds or human rights activists. End Summary.

12. (U) On November 24, the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria (NOHR-S) released a statement condemning the SARG's decision to prevent NOHR-S President Ammar Qurabi from traveling to Jordan to attend a seminar on civil society in the Arab world. This conference was partly organized by the Aspen Institute. The statement also condemned the regime's actions that prevented other notables from leaving the country. They include: head of the Kurdish Organization for the Defense of Human Rights in Syria (DAD) Mustafa Oso, who was attempting to travel to Cairo for a workshop sponsored by the International Federation for Human Rights; Chairman of the Arab Organization for Human Rights Rasem Suleiman, on his way to Turkey to participate in the International Forum of Jerusalem; and defense lawyer Siri Khoury, who defended Anwar al-Bunni and Michel Kilo among others and was on her way to Jordan.

13. (C) Most of the personalities recently prevented from traveling abroad have been officially banned from leaving the country for some time -- in some cases the travel bans go back years. Despite the official ban, however, many of these human rights activists have been able to leave the country if they obtained a one-time travel ban waiver from one of the security services (reftel). In fact, Qurabi had obtained many such waivers in the past and had attended international conferences in Europe on a regular basis.

14. (C) According to the NOHR, the regime has closed the loophole by issuing multiple travel bans from myriad of different security services in Syria. In effect, an activist would now have to get a waiver from each of the security services that applied a travel ban. In practice, getting multiple travel ban waivers is next to impossible given the non-transparent and extrajudicial way in which security

services apply travel bans. The apparent shift in an unwritten SARG policy demonstrates a tightening of control over the extent to which regime opponents can communicate with the outside world, according to Qurabi who poloff met with on November 26.

¶5. (C) Comment. Aside from the further diminishment of individual freedoms in Syria, the regime,s most recent measures to prevent regime critics from traveling is yet another example of the on-going crackdown on dissent that has intensified over the last six months. Moreover, the closing of the loophole on travel bans fits a pattern of stepped up regime security measures geared towards not only human rights activists but also a wide range of groups including Kurds, Iraqi refugees, and islamists.

CORBIN